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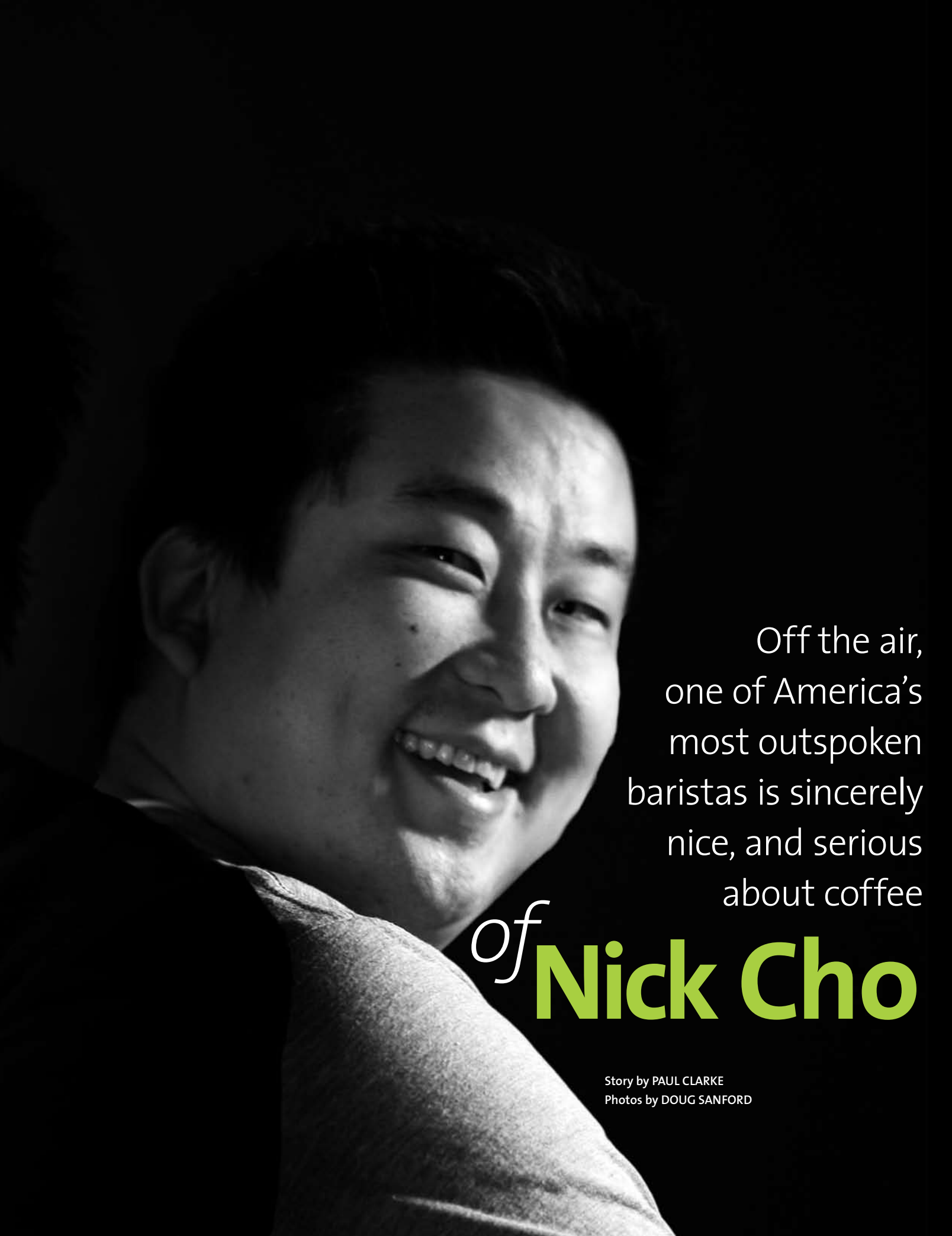
**GREAT COFFEE IN
UNEXPECTED PLACES**

**AMAZING COCKTAIL
& FOOD PAIRINGS**





The
TWO SIDES

A black and white close-up portrait of Nick Cho, a man with dark hair, smiling warmly. He is wearing a dark shirt. The background is dark, making his face the central focus.

Off the air,
one of America's
most outspoken
baristas is sincerely
nice, and serious
about coffee

of **Nick Cho**

Story by PAUL CLARKE
Photos by DOUG SANFORD



ON A LATE SPRING DAY AT A COFFEE CONFERENCE

in Long Beach, Calif., a coffee bar owner from the East Coast is talking to a barista from Kansas. Their discussion, not surprisingly, is about coffee, and in the busy conference center their voices are inaudible from just a few yards away. Yet their conversation is being heard around the world via a podcast posted on portafilter.net, a place where baristas, coffee shop owners and hardcore coffee enthusiasts—more than 2,000 subscribers at last count—converge to hear the latest news from inside the world of specialty coffee.

Most industry chats can be about as fascinating as the IRS code, but in this case the host is Nick Cho, owner of Murky Coffee in Washington, D.C., and a board member of the Specialty Coffee Association of America. For these podcasts, Cho and his co-host, Jay Caragay, mix inside knowledge of coffee with the boisterous brashness of talk radio. Away from the mike Cho is polite and professional, freely sharing his opinions in rapid bursts of speech notable for their emphatic sincerity; online, he and Caragay become showmen, rattling off edgy remarks and off-color jokes between discussions of coffee shop renovations, barista competitions and the latest industry gossip. A mix of hardworking businessman and showboating entertainer, Cho is outspoken, passionate and technologically adept—traits that have made him one of the more vocal and increasingly influential figures in specialty coffee.

“Nick’s typecast as the maverick kid, kind of a gunslinger with a lot of energy,” says Ellie Matuszak of Coffee Solutions in Los Angeles and a fellow SCAA board member. Matuszak worked with Cho when both served on the Barista Guild of America’s executive council, and says that Cho’s selection for the SCAA board marked the first time a barista had held the position. “His election to the [SCAA] board was something that people in the professional barista community hadn’t seen before,” says Matuszak. “It rocked our world a little bit to have one of our own on the board.”

Cho opened the first Murky Coffee in Georgetown in 2002—he now owns two shops in the D.C. area—but his professional identity is closely related to the role of barista. A frequent presence at barista competitions as competitor, judge and emcee, Cho is working to elevate the role of barista from a basic foodservice job to one that holds a place of prominence and responsibility in the culinary world. “The barista is really like a sommelier,” Cho says. “Ultimately they’re not only serving coffee, but carrying out the story of that coffee—the way it’s related to the individuals who grew the coffee, or telling the story of how that particular varietal came to exist.”

At Murky, the process of telling the story of quality coffee begins as soon as a customer walks through the door. “At most shops it’d be nice if the barista said, ‘Would you like the Kenya or the El Salvador?’” Cho says. “We go one step further, and the baristas identify the coffee by its true origin—they say, ‘Would you like the Rwanda Humure Cooperative or the El Salvador Finca Mauritania?’ It’s important to present it that way, without shoving it down people’s throats.”

Cho’s opinions about coffee and the ways it should be handled, prepared and marketed sometimes make waves in the industry. In 2005 he proposed a Barista Code of Conduct that was designed to professionalize the position, and as a member of the SCAA board he’s also developed a reputation for speaking his mind and posing direct questions to industry leaders. But while these acts can spark debate, Cho’s sincerity and friendly manner usually keep the conversations from spiraling into a counterproductive tangle.

"Nick's not afraid to ask the tough questions," says Shanna Germain, editor of *Roast* magazine. "I've been at town hall-type events where he's stood up and said what everyone's thinking, but no one is willing to say. He's able to do that in a way that's not offensive, but really curious and straightforward, and often funny. It's the kind of presentation that gets people to go, 'Oh, I'm so glad you asked that.' It gets people to answer, which is amazing."

Cho's vocal enthusiasm has also proven useful in the more public realm of barista competitions, such as the World Barista Championship, where he served as emcee last year in Tokyo. "When you see him up there leading the crowd, talking about the contestants—he can talk about coffee and get the crowd engaged, and he can go for hours on end without ever repeating what he's said," Germain says. "He never loses the audience's attention."

Increasingly, Cho gets attention through portafilter.net, a group blog maintained by Cho, Matuszak and other coffee pros. The site launched in 2005, and one of its notable components is the series of podcasts recorded by Cho and Caragay. From the beginning, Cho saw the podcasts as a way to share with others what he was learning from his conversations with some of the most dynamic people in the coffee world. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool if there was a way to have these conversations and take them public, so that anyone could listen in and learn along with me?'" he says. Today these podcasts draw a growing audience of both coffee pros and connoisseurs.

A shock-jock style pervades the podcasts—racy jokes, goofy humor and a Snoop Dogg intro are all common elements—but the recordings are rich with observations and rants on coffee topics, and typically feature interviews with coffee experts, like Geoff Watts from *Intelligentsia* Coffee, Mark Prince from the *CoffeeGeek* Web site and Andrew Barnett from *Ecco Caffè*. The podcasts haven't been without controversy: During the SCAA conference last May, one podcast was removed and another edited following complaints that some of Cho's provocative remarks went too far. On the whole, however, Cho and Caragay have taken what could otherwise be dry industry observations and made them not only interesting, but entertaining. "Our primary purpose is to entertain, and after that it's to inform and educate," Cho says. "If it doesn't taste good, no one's going to eat it. If it's boring, it's going to be like a spoonful of medicine, so you've got to use that spoonful of sugar with it."

Cho's ambitions for *Murky* are modest—he anticipates possibly opening another store—but says what interests him more than any vision of success is making sure that his business, and hopefully the larger industry, are guided by values of quality and integrity. "I'm divorced with two kids," he says. "I don't have a vision for my children; it's more like you have a set of principles that you raise them on, and everything else falls into the category of nurturing. That relates to my business as well: It's not so much that I have this thing that I want it to be and I want to make a lot of money, but as long as it all works out, it's about the manifestation of that core set of values and building upon that. Everything else is nurturing it along." ■

